The Professor Who Manufactures Playwrights

By
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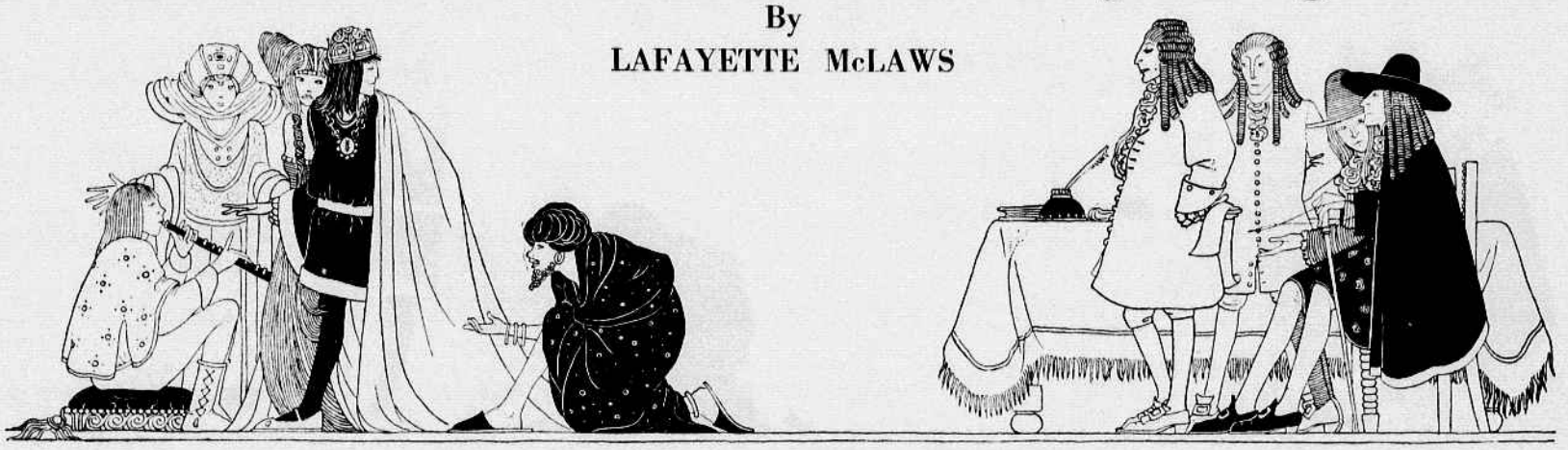

A FEW years ago "Salvation Nell" startled Broadway. Even the most blasé of first-nighters were interested, and the critics were prompt in announcing that Mrs. Minnie Maddern Fiske had never had a better part. The public, whose opinions the man in the boxoffice considers of first importance, were both pleased and surprised. They were quick to recognize that "Salvation Nell" was only a bit of real life plucked from the streets in which they lived. Why was this sort of plays so long in coming? they asked. Why weren't they given oftener? Why, if the streets about them were filled with such dramatic material, was it necessary to drag London, Paris, Berlin, and the ends of the earth for plays in which at best they could take only mild interest? The result of this feeling among the public was that Mrs. Fiske scored the hit of the season. "Salvation Nell" gave her the longest run she had enjoyed in years.

Then a second shock came. "Salvation Nell" was the work of a Harvard undergraduate. Edward Sheldon had learned his stagecraft of George Pierce Baker, that highbrow professor in Cambridge, at the head of Harvard's new course in playwriting.

Theatrical managers are not all slow. The late Henry B. Harris made a standing offer to be one of five to contribute ten thousand dollars each to endow a chair in dramatic composition in an American university. If Harvard's first class in playwriting could turn out such work as "Salvation Nell," he felt that the time had come for the university and the theater to draw nearer together. Unfortunately for American drama, Mr. Harris did not live to mature his plans.

John Craig, the first American manager to offer a prize for plays by native authors.

WHILE all this was taking place in New York, John Craig, over in Boston, was doing some thinking.

"As I was driving in from the country the spring after the success of 'Salvation Nell' I passed Harvard," Mr. Craig says, when speaking of the origin of the now famous John Craig Harvard-Radcliffe prize plays. "The sight of the university made me think of Mr. Sheldon's splendid play, and the reports that had come to me of the work being done by Professor Baker's classes in playwriting. Of course it was all specially interesting to me, and somehow the idea came to me, Why can't I do something to help these young people working out here?

"Later in the day, meeting a friend of mine who was also in close touch with Professor Baker, I asked him what he thought of my offering a prize for the best play written by Baker's students. My friend became enthusiastic; wanted me to write Professor Baker at once. It wasn't many days later that Professor Baker invited me to lunch with him for the purpose of talking over my idea of a prize play.

"When it came to the amount of the prize I finally agreed to give five hundred dollars, half to be given the author of the winning play, and the rest to go to Harvard Library to buy books on the drama.

"I was building better than I knew. Getting books in the Harvard library—me and my heirs forever—is a monument I never hoped to attain! The prize plays! Why, I thought if we got one out of the first half-dozen to pay back the prize money it would be as much as we ought to expect. The first prize winner jolted all that out of my head. It ran nine weeks. Think of that! Nine weeks with two performances a day! Most of the time the house was packed. Later Henry Miller produced it in San Francisco, and later still I took my company to Chicago in it. It made money for both the Castle Square Theater and the author."

Though the second prize-winning play was built along more serious lines, it ran five weeks,—an unusually long run for a single play by a resident stock company. The third play to be awarded the Craig prize, "Believe Me, Xanthippe," after running twelve weeks at the Castle Square Theater, was taken to New York, where it had a good run on Broadway. The fourth and most recent prize-winner, "Common Clay," is now running at the Castle Square, where, according to present prospects, it will remain for the rest of the season.

"Before I began to produce the prize plays," Mr. Craig candidly admits, "the audiences at the Castle Square were drawn from a limited class. It's a stock company, and the prices are not high. You know what that means. That first prize winner brought all Cambridge, and a large number of new patrons from Boston. During the run of the second we used to think that everybody in Boston had acquired the Castle Square habit. With 'Believe Me, Xanthippe,' and 'Common Clay,' it seems as if we gathered all New England in. Yes, I builded better, much better, than I knew."

THE dramatic movement at Harvard started more than twenty years ago, according to Professor Baker's calculations. When an undergraduate he was told to write a thesis on pre-Shakespearean dramatists. The result must have been satisfactory; for within a few years after his graduation a half-year course on the subject was turned over to him. A few years later another half-year course, a supplement to the regular Shakespeare course, was given him. These two he combined as the History of English Drama from the Beginning to the Close of the Theaters. In Harvard bulletins it is listed as English 14.

"Soon after I began to give English 14," says Professor Baker, "students began to ask if they might hand in original plays instead of theses. I refused steadily. It was a history course, and besides I did not feel competent to criticize their plays. Several years later there was such a demand for the continuation of dramatic history, bringing it down to the present day, that the university added English 39. From the very first of that course the demand from students to be allowed to write plays was insistent.

"Finally I picked out a few of the Radcliffe class and told them to bring me original one-act plays. The result was so encouraging that two years later the university added the course in playwriting, and the first Harvard class was formed. Edward Sheldon was in that class."

THOUGH few people appear to realize it, Professor Baker's capacity for stretching time is limited. It being humanly impossible for him to accomplish more than a certain amount of work, his class in playwriting is limited. Each division, Harvard and Radcliffe, is limited to twelve students each. To gain entrance to the class an applicant must submit an original play. The best twenty-four are selected, and their writers become members of what has now become, both in Harvard and in Radcliffe, a notable course,—47.

Professor Baker's methods are surprisingly simple, especially if one comes believing him to be a highbrow. At the first meeting of a new class he gives a talk about the drama in general, and in particular about his inability to teach anyone to write a play unless nature has endowed the beginner with dramatic talent. He firmly believes, and tries to impress it on his students, that dramatic, like poetic, talent, is born, not made. He defines it as the germ, or the raw material, of theatrical talent. The latter he believes can be developed from the former by hard study, and usually much practice in the theater, and thereby learning the limitations and requirements of the stage.

Then he adds that as there are no rules for writing plays there are no textbooks for class use; but he advises them to read books on playwriting by William Thompson Price, William Archer, and Alfred Hennequin, and to deliver to him at the next class meeting three short stories which they think they would like to dramatize.

At the second meeting Professor Baker strikes the first of the two notes on which his students will hear him pound to the end of the course,—Consider your public. He points out that if a play fails to attract the public, it fails in its aim. Plays are written primarily to be presented on the stage to the public. Writers who are not sufficiently interested in the public to give it what it wants, in the way it wants it, had best turn their attention to some other form of literature,—novel, short story, or even the essay.

After discussing these stories Professor Baker strikes the second of his great notes,—Scenario. He reads several, some to show what a good scenario should con-

Professor Baker, the man who overcame college prejudice against playwriting.